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The Gothic in the Brontë Sisters

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Abstract

Gothic fiction as a literary form, which largely catered to a female readership, arrived at a time when the rising influence of the middle class changed the socio-political structure, and when the empire-building project brought with it a confrontation with the figure of the Other. So, while doing an analysis of gothic elements in Emily Brontë's 'Wuthering Heights' and Charlotte Brontë's 'Jane Eyre', this paper intends to show how the gothic itself stems from the complexities of its age, while illustrating the way the Brontë sisters complicate the understanding of the genre by conflating it with the 'novel' mode of writing and realistic fiction of their time. The paper critically examines the two novels by drawing upon Tabish Khair's notion of "postcolonial gothic."

Keywords: *Gothic, Victorian Novel, Postcolonial Critique, Brontë, Wuthering Heights, Jane Eyre.*

Introduction

Gothic fiction is the narrative of antiquated spaces, of terror and horror of the present confronting a dark, macabre past, of the fear of the unknown and longings of the long suppressed. With the violence of emotions and melodramatic events, the genre questions the very sanity of a civilised world that refuses to acknowledge any divergence. However, the fact that Gothic fiction, as a literary form that largely catered to a female readership, arrived at a time when the rising influence of the middle class changed the socio-political structure, and the empire-building project brought with it a confrontation with the figure of the Other, is no coincidence. So, while doing an analysis of gothic elements in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (2002) and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (2008), this paper intends to show how the gothic itself stems from the complexities of its age, while illustrating the way the Brontë sisters complicate the understanding of the genre by conflating it with the 'novel' mode of writing and realistic fiction of their time. The paper critically examines the two novels by drawing upon Tabish Khair's (2009) notion of "postcolonial gothic."

The Deviant Outsider

A dominant feature of Gothic is the anxiety of invasion by a sexually deviant, physically monstrous, emotionally violent, and psychologically perverted individual, generally identified as the Other of the rational, European, male Self. The feature is so prominent that Khair (2009) writes that one can read gothic fiction as the "writing of the Otherness" (p. 6). It is, he says, with the entry of the Other that the Gothic narrative begins, and it is by the destruction or containment of this Otherness that such texts end. So, when one picks up a text like *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*, the first thing that comes to mind is an image of the central figures as orphans who are seen as interlopers, intruding on a closely knit network of Christian family. Heathcliff is introduced as a child "as dark almost as if it came from the devil" (p.29), who from the very beginning "bred bad feeling in the house" (p.30), while Jane is a "discord" (p.12), a nobody in Gateshed Hall, the "uncongenial

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alien" (p.13) thrust upon Mrs. Reed's household. It is important to note that when Heathcliff's darkness is repeatedly emphasised, plain Jane is conscious of the beauty of blue-eyed Georgiana. What sets these unwelcome children apart from the rest of the family is not just the physical difference and beggarly status, but the violent psychological makeup of their being. Heathcliff's cunning and vindictive nature is displayed on several occasions, like the manipulation of Hindley to get his pony, and Jane's Otherness is emphasised by the violent emotions and passion that she harbours as a young child, quite uncharacteristic of her age. The otherwise destitute Heathcliff lacks a sense of gratitude toward his provider, while the obstinate Jane refuses to acknowledge Mrs Reed as her benefactress. The purpose is to mark their status not simply as outsiders but as the significant Other whose presence threatens the family network. Thus, in the course of the narrative, Heathcliff proves himself to be the Satan who will "wheedle" (p.32) out the family of its fortune, as Hindley declared in the beginning, while "queer" (p.32) Jane is declared as the one born to be Mrs Reed's torment till her last days.

What further connects Heathcliff and Jane is the physical and emotional violence they receive at the hands of the rightful heirs of their respective foster homes; it is Hindley Earnshaw and John Reed who are the prime cause for the misery of the two orphan children. And though both react differently to the treatment they received, neither of them is able to extract an approving glance from those around. When Jane's assertive nature and capacity to speak plainly against injustice leave Mrs Reed in a state of disquietude, Miss. Abbot complains of the "tiresome, ill-conditioned child who always looked as if she were watching everybody, and scheming plots underhand" (p.21). In contrast to Jane, Heathcliff is "sullen, patient child; hardened, perhaps, to ill-treatment" (p.30), and yet he hardly evokes sympathy from the prejudiced elders. Rather, his reserve is seen in the text as the preparatory ground for the sinister self that he reveals himself to be later in the novel. In quite an interesting way, a statement that John Reed makes about his cousin in *Jane Eyre*- "No; you are less than a servant, for you do nothing for your keep" (p.9)- is reiterated in *Wuthering Heights*, but with positions quite reversed. Heathcliff, the new owner of Heights, castigates Catherine Heathcliff, the rightful heir, for living on his charity while others "earn their bread" (p.25). Thus, the threat, merely suggested in one novel, becomes real in the other.

Yet despite their similarities, one can see that there is an essential difference between Heathcliff's intrusion and that of Jane. Jane is an orphan, but she is not without roots. She is connected by blood to the Reeds and, in the end, is provided for by an uncle who leaves her wealthy enough to live a respectable life. Thus, Donna Heiland (2008) suggests Jane's position changes in the course of the novel from an outsider to an insider, as she moves from Gateshead to Thornfield to Moorhouse to finally Ferndean. This is to be contrasted with Heathcliff, who remains incapable of being accommodated within the familiar circle with nobody to associate with, except a dead Catherine, and thus his character is annihilated for the sake of the narrative. Heathcliff, with his completely unknown origins, evokes gothic terror in its true sense. So, when "Heathcliff perpetuates the Gothicism of his own life by imposing similar experience on everyone around him…Jane finds a way out of the episodic gothic of her life." (Heiland, p.121).

Ghosts from the Colonies

Another distinctive feature of Gothic fiction is the presence of characters haunted by a secret past and a guilt-ridden conscience, and the Gothic's purpose is to bring about a direct confrontation with what has hitherto been unconsciously buried or purposely avoided. Much before the mystery of the third-storey and the reason for Rochester's peculiar nature is revealed, the gloomy hero confesses to Jane how "I envy you your peace of mind, your clear conscience, your unpolluted memory. Little girl, a memory without blot or contamination must be an exquisite treasure- an inexhaustible source of pure refreshment," (p.115) for he himself "degenerated" (p.116) when fate wronged him. In almost the vocabulary of the monster from *Frankenstein* (2002), he declares "hampered, burdened, cursed as I am? Besides, since happiness is irrevocably denied me, I have a right to get pleasure out of life: and I WILL get it, cost what it may" (p.116). The mad wife whom he had so desperately hidden from the world not only attempts to kill him in bed but threatens the happy future

he so determinedly wishes to have, when she tears his bride's veil; which again a parallel to *Frankenstein* when the monster kills the bride of his creator.

This haunting acquires a special significance since Rochester's wife is a Creole and his so-called sins have been committed on foreign lands. With the expansion of the colonial empire, the confrontation with the colonised self becomes inevitable. Khair (2009) suggests that "by eighteenth century the empire was not just out there; it has also started reaching the center…..it was present in Leeds and London and Liverpool...in the shape of tinkers, travelling sellers and gypsies," and although the mainstream literature of Austen and Dickens refuses to acknowledge its presence, the "ghosts from the colonies" have started penetrating the imperial centre (p.7-9). Hence, the accompanying paranoia of dealing with all that which is not the self, the Other. Bertha has not only been denied a voice in the text, which is the story of Jane Eyre, but she has been described in almost animalistic terms- "In the deep shade, at the farther end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell: it groveled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange animal" (p.250). It is noticeable that the way Heathcliff is referred to as 'it' before he is given a name, Bertha too here is being described with the same epithet. Heathcliff at least spoke some "gibberish that nobody could understand" (p.29), Bertha does not say anything; she only "gurgled and moaned" (p126); she is only heard through "snarling, snatching sounds, almost like a dog quarreling"(p.178). The depiction brings her closer to the image of 'savages' that Joseph Conrad describes in the *Heart of Darkness* (2006).

The colonised is visualised in purely negative terms and serves as an antithesis to the European self. Themselves savages they threaten European civilisations, dark and evil, standing opposite to Christian beliefs. Thus, Bertha laughs in a 'demonic,' 'goblin' laughter, an 'unnatural sound.' Yet this Other is essential for the survival as well as sustenance of the Self. As opposed to Jane, the 'cunning' 'big woman' represents 'virile force,' and so there is a sharp contrast between "clear eyes" and "red balls," "this face with that mask," "this form with that bulk" (p.251). The gothic, in fact, uses *doppelgängers* to relieve its central characters of their conflicted psychological selves. Jane was once identified as a 'mad cat' in her childhood, and it is the fierce, violent part of her nature that Bertha typifies, the "truest and darkest double" (Gilbert & Gubar 1979, p. 360). To become acceptable within the dominant model, Jane must exorcise this part of herself, and thus Bertha must die. Also, it is Bertha's fortune and a distant uncle's colonial possessions that enable Rochester and Jane to achieve the domestic bliss they attain at the end. The empire's economy is sustained by the resources from the Other, who is projected as the cause of terror.

If we look at the character of Heathcliff, writes Khair, then we realize that it is not incidental that Mr. Earnshaw had returned from Liverpool for "in 1769, the year in which Mr. Earnshaw found Heathcliff in the Liverpool streets, the city was England's largest slave-trading port, conducting seventy to eighty-five percent of the English slave trade along the Liverpool triangle" (Meyer qtd. by Khair, 2009, p. 66). Khair further suggests that it is Heathcliff's Otherness that the text repeatedly emphasises and tries to negotiate at various levels: 1) In the figure of Hindley, one witnesses "a class hatred permeated with elements of what Anthony Kwame Appiah has termed intrinsic racism." 2) Then the "more common kind of fear that people like Nelly display: this is fear that situates Heathcliff's physical difference on a moral plane, thus divesting him of all positive attributes." 3) "Finally, there are people like Isabella who move from a fascinated dislike of Heathcliff's Otherness to a romantic idealization of his difference……. Isabella's romanticisation of Heathcliff is similar to an attempt to force the sublime into the narrower and more decorous garments of the Beautiful" (p.66-67).

It might be useful to note that Heathcliff, as a character, remains beyond comprehension because he is meant to be more of a concept than a real being. Firstly, he represents the anxiety of a middle class caught in the conflicting position of confronting an authoritative past it wished to overthrow, yet desired to retain and cherish the aristocratic grandeur of the old order. His capitalistic land grabbing is part of a larger psyche of a class, which fears intrusion in privileges accumulated over years- Earnshaw is an old name in the neighbourhood, and Heathcliff a threat. And though a seeming balance is achieved at the end by return of the

land to rightful heirs, his looming presence over the entire text betrays such easy solutions. Secondly, he is the 'dark' face of the imperial project that the European self purposely avoided and yet remained in its guilty conscience. He is all the evil that this class, race, is capable of doing, and fears encountering the same in return; to quote Khair, "Heathcliff is learning his lessons of terror…..They are the same instruments-language, manipulation, legal deeds, marriage connections, money-with which his marginalization had been enforced in the past" (p. 102). And thus, in the language of Joseph Conrad, "The Horror! The Horror!" of it (78).

The Sublime and The Supernatural

This takes us to another element of the gothic: the use of the sublime and the supernatural. In *Jane Eyre* the gothic and the uncanny is "almost always rationalized" (Khair, 2009, p.10)- the white light that Jane saw as "vision coming from another world" (p.14) is explained by her older self as light coming from some lantern; Gypsy who turns out to be Rochester in disguise; the 'demonic laugh' which is given a face in Grace Pool and an existence in a 'mad' wife. However, the case is different in *Wuthering Heights*, whose Heathcliff comes from the world of the Gondals. In the Gondal myths that Emily and Anne Brontë created, the world is ruled by the violence and passion of emotions; every idea must reach its extreme, be it hate, anguish, life, death, or war, so much so that a tussle arises between them to exist. The sublime is confronted in its stark, naked form, verging on evoking terror and fear rather than the beautiful. It is the anguish of Heathcliff's soul, the pain of loss of love, of life, of self, that makes the story of his revenge unbearable. This is to be contrasted with the position of Jane who has a "growing ability to re-imagine the uncanny as familiar and even intimate part of her life that allows her to transform the gothic into something else" (Heiland, 2004, p.121); "For Charlotte Bronte, though not for Emily, the sublime has to be erased by the beautiful, horror by anger, 'evil' by trickery, exultation by domestic love" (Khair, 2009, p. 38).

Gothic fiction, one can see, is the writing of excesses and of transgression, of rebellious forces and energies which fall out of the dominant order. Thus, an oft-used image is that of a woman confined within the domains of patriarchy. Jane is locked in the Red Room while Bertha is imprisoned for years by her husband as the 'mad' wife, unfit for the normal world. Jane, in her fury, represents a "picture of passion" (p.9), and "it is only on condition of perfect submission and stillness" (p.14) that Mrs. Reeds would grant her liberty. What is noticeable here is that the attempt is not only to tame the 'mad cat' through isolation in a dark, lonely chamber, but the use of punishment as an important means of teaching the desired lesson. Confinement in such a context serves as an important means of dealing with the "unruly female principle," which can threaten the stability of a patriarchal order of power (Hogle, 2002, p.10). It is through controlling the body of the woman that her spirit is brought into submission. To quote Elaine Showalter (1977), Bertha is an "incarnation of the flesh, of female sexuality in its most irredeemably bestial and terrifying form" that must be caged so that her sexual energy is brought under control (p.118). A woman's passion, energy and desire are closely linked to her sexuality, which in turn is pushed to the realms of madness, so that its curtailment can be justified. Rochester thus appears as the male authority set up to guard the virulent female energy. Showalter (1977) argues that it is only after the "purging of the lusts of the flesh" that Jane and Rochester can unite (p.122). This only shows how, for Charlotte Brontë, the gothic must be contained for the survival of the domestic.

In Contrast, Emily Brontë begins from where most Austen novels would leave off, the "consequences of the socially sanctioned choice" (Pykett, 1989, p.88). Given the parameters of eighteenth and nineteenth-century novels, Catherine makes a 'rational choice' by choosing Edgar over Heathcliff; such an arrangement only ends up "exposing inadequacies of appropriate marriage" (Pykett, 1989, p.88). The wild, carefree child of nature is disintegrated into the image of a mad woman who feels as if she has been trapped in Edgar's house. Her call to open the window aligns with the gothic horror that Lockwood feels at the beginning of the novel. The "terror of this scene is intricately connected with displacement" for Catherine, who has been "displaced, banished from her house and love" (Khair, 2009, p.65). Heiland (2008) makes an interesting observation here, when the author writes that the choice between a "morally dubious Heathcliff and fair, morally good Edgar" makes us question as to who is the real threat for the gothic heroine, and who the savior,

for Edgar, it appears, is the real threat who uses marriage as a means of brining Catherine into his "limiting" and "stultifying" world; Heathcliff on the other hand is the "Satanic figure," the rebel, who is the real rescuer (p.119).

A closer look at Wuthering Heights reveals that Catherine is not the only one who feels trapped by the confines of her room. Lyn Pykett (1989) points out that when Isabella moves from the "stifling confinement of genteel household to brutal incarceration at the Heights," Catherine Linton shifts from the "bonds of gentility and over-protected environment of Grange to enforced marriage with Linton Heathcliff" (p.77). This leads us to the way Gothic deals with domestic spaces, where marriages become the legal means of restricting the freedom and movement of women.

Conclusion

What makes these two novels masterpieces of their time is the way the two sisters constantly play with genres, giving their novels a complexity of thought and form. While for Charlotte the domestic tale of love must survive at the cost of the gothic horror that lies underneath it, Emily prefers an encounter with the fiercest aspect of nature, so much so that it verges on the realm of terror. And as per Khair's description, the colonial subject becomes the source of gothic horrors in both the novels. The essential difference between Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* is that when the first one uses gothic effect selectively, to the advantage of its white protagonist, the second author makes a more concerted effort to decode and embrace the gothic.

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